



Bishop Edward Fenwick, "Missionary of the Ohio Frontier", laid the groundwork for the establishment of early parishes.

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1819, was attended by but 100 of the faithful. The celebrant was Father Edward Fenwick, later Bishop Fenwick, first Bishop of Cincinnati.

Cincinnati, of course, had an already established Diocese by the mid-1830's. Catholics in Stonelick Valley had begun to seek the aid of Diocesan officials in the establishment of a parish. They received, at first, more sympathy and encouragement than substantive help, as the resources of the Diocese were then, as they are today, limited. Limited is perhaps an understatement. The first church in the Cincinnati See, which preceded the establishment of the first church in Clermont County by only 20 years, was a modest frame structure measuring but 30 feet by 55 feet. It was built at Vine and Liberty Streets, and only after strenuous efforts. The *Cincinnati Post* reported, "Prejudices against the church were strong in those days. When they sought in 1819 to buy a lot for their edifice, the Catholics were told to go outside the corporation line."

Things changed quickly, however, and in 1826, St. Peter in Chains Cathedral was constructed.....next to the present site of Cincinnati's City Hall! The history of the Diocese influenced the establishment and development of its parishes. It is a story of heroism, dedication and sacrifice.

Bishop Fenwick, despite the enormous physical hardships of administering such a large territory, was undaunted and untiring. He had brought three priests from Kentucky, who spent virtually all of their time traveling from settlement to settlement, bringing the sacraments to widely scattered farmers and tradesmen. Reaching the outposts of the vast Diocese was slow and difficult. Settlements on the banks of the Ohio, its major tributaries, and on the shores of the Great Lakes were somewhat easier to visit. But the ease was only relative. Lake Michigan's and Lake Huron's shorelines were iced over for five months each year. Lake Erie, shallow and treacherous, was hazardous to small craft, and the streams were subject to violent flooding. Land travel, on foot or on horseback, was filled with dangers: the boggy flatlands of the North were filled with disease-carrying mosquitoes, there were still hostile bands of Indians, and there were, of course, strong anti-Catholic sentiments on the part of some settlers.

In 1821, there were only five or six parishes in the entire State of Ohio. The first, St. Joseph's, founded in 1808 in Somerset, brought Father Fenwick to Ohio from Kentucky, at the behest of Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore. An even earlier parish, started at East Union in Noble County in about 1803, did not endure. This was a fragile and impoverished base from which to sustain the Diocese.

Nevertheless, Bishop Fenwick managed to plant firmly the seeds of Catholicism in the new Diocese. By 1829 a seminary, The Athenaeum, was founded. It became the parent institution to two

later seminaries, Mt. St. Mary's of the West and St. Gregory's, and to Xavier University. At the same time, he had encouraged a nun, Sister St. Paul, to establish an academy for Catholic women in 1824. He also founded the oldest, operating Catholic newspaper in the United States, *The Catholic Telegraph*.

Bishop Fenwick was not to be deterred. He embarked for Europe in 1823 to raise money to fund the growth of his See. He returned with over \$20,000.00, a fortune in those days, in cash and valuables. By 1832, there were 22 churches, 24 priests, a seminary college, a women's academy, a cathedral, and a newspaper, all in full operation.

The growth of the Diocese was strongly aided by another, completely secular, event. The Ohio Legislature decided that the Ohio River and Lake Erie, the state's two great avenues of commerce, should be linked by canals, encouraging economic growth. Without the aid of mechanized construction equipment, this meant the influx of large numbers of workers to dig the canals and construct the locks. Most of these were Irish Catholics. The Catholic population swelled rapidly, sustaining the growth and permanence of the Diocese. Bishop Fenwick died before the full impact of the influx could be felt. His final journey tells much of this frontier priest's life.

In June 1832, he left Cincinnati for Somerset. From there he traveled to Lancaster, Canton and Cleveland on horseback. From Cleveland, he went by lake boat to Detroit. From Detroit, he voyaged up the St. Clair River to Lake Huron and north to Sault Ste. Marie. He had contracted cholera in the swamps of northern Ohio and was suffering with chills and fever. Sailing southward, he visited Mackinac on July 17, and then returned to Detroit. By August he was in Tiffin, then Norwalk. He continued overland to Canton, then to Steubenville, where he performed Confirmations. He traveled briefly to Pittsburgh, then to New Lisbon for more Confirmations on September 23. Two days later, burning with fever, he died in Wooster.

But the Holy See of Cincinnati was firmly in place. The "Missionary of Ohio" had seen to that. The soil, from which the first parish in Clermont County would spring, had been plowed.